Omohundro Institute of
Early American History and Culture
Williamsburg, Virginia

Exceptionalism after All; Or, The Perils of Postcolonialism
Author(s): Michael Zuckerman
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Apr., 2007), pp. 259-262
Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4491618
Accessed: 03/03/2012 19:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The William and Mary Quarterly*.

http://www.jstor.org

Exceptionalism after All; Or, The Perils of Postcolonialism

Michael Zuckerman

THE line I love is from the chase sequence in the most irresistible of all action movies, *The Princess Bride*. The hunchbacked Sicilian mastermind Vizzini has kidnapped the lovely Buttercup just before her wedding to the evil Prince Humperdinck of Florin. The Sicilian has calculated everything. He has an hour's start on Humperdinck. He has only to cross the Florin Channel and climb the Cliffs of Insanity to get to the Guilder frontier, kill the princess bride, and vanish without a trace. But as Vizzini's vessel is crossing the channel, his Spanish henchman Inigo Montoya sees a black boat in the distance that seems to be following them. Vizzini assures Inigo that this is "inconceivable." No one in Florin knows yet that they have taken Buttercup. And if, somehow, someone is following them, it hardly matters. They have the fastest ship in all of Florin. It is "inconceivable" that the black boat could even keep up with, let alone overtake, them. Nonetheless the Spaniard reports that the black craft is gaining on them. Vizzini's ship lands at the base of the Cliffs of Insanity while their pursuer is still at sea. The cliffs are almost impossible to climb, but Vizzini anticipates every difficulty. His other henchman is the prodigiously powerful giant Fezzik, who lashes the other three to his massive torso and begins hauling them up the sheer face. When they are halfway to the top, Inigo looks down and sees that a masked man dressed in black has landed the black boat and begun to climb. Indeed, the swordsman tells the mastermind, the man in black is gaining on them. "Inconceivable," Vizzini replies once more. And then Inigo utters the line I love. "You keep using that word," he says. "I do not think it means what you think it means."

I do not think that postcolonial means what Jack P. Greene thinks it means. For that matter I do not think that theory means what Greene thinks it does either.

Greene's misappropriations of postcolonial thinking are subtle. Or rather they are flat where postcolonial thinking is subtle. He conflates

Michael Zuckerman is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania.

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Series, Volume LXIV, Number 2, April 2007

the continuance of colonial habits into independence—his concern—with the persistence of a subaltern state of mind after independence, the postcolonial problematic.

More than that, he annexes settler colonies to colonies of exploitation with a sublime heedlessness of postcolonial theory (conceding for the sake of argument that there is any theory there in the first place). His settler colonies have, as he admits, "many distinctive features." They do not come within the compass of the colonial condition that engages postcolonialists. Greene's effort to assimilate the settler colonies to postcolonial analysis depends on his slide from postcoloniality to "the broader history of colonialism." But that recurrence to "the principal criteria that define modern colonialism"—settler domination and racial subordination—brings readers back to a generic coloniality.[1] It does not enable scholars to see anything new.

Again and again during the course of his extraordinary career, Greene has widened historians' frames of conceptualization. He has always read more and more widely than others. He still does. But his dalliance with postcolonial theory is at odds with his actual interest in explicating America.

The postcolonial impulsion is inherently cosmopolitan. Its perspective is a world perspective. Its best insights illuminate the many who were ruled rather than the few who ruled. Greene's impulsion in his essay is inherently parochial. His focus is on the British colonies of the North American mainland and on the nation they announced in 1776. The disjunction is implicit in his discussion of colonies and becomes explicit in his treatment of early modern state formation.

As Greene recounts the roots of American resistance after the Seven Years' War, he gives up all pretense of theoretical generality. The dynamic he describes is uniquely the dynamic of the thirteen rebellious British colonies. It did not appear in the British Caribbean, in the British East Indies, or even in British Canada. It certainly did not appear in the Spanish or French outposts of the eighteenth century.

And as Greene describes the constitutional settlement of 1787–88, he compounds the idiosyncrasy of the new nation and the distinctiveness of the regime its Founders devised. American federalism took its constitutional origin in the states and left the governance that actually touched citizens to the states, "in pointed contrast" to the state making of the French Revolution.[2] Indeed the young Republic repudiated the

[1] Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64, no. 2 (April 2007): 238.

[2] Ibid., 244.

few who ever attempted to establish a European state. The Jeffersonian triumph over the Hamiltonians and the extinction of high Federalism that it portended made manifest that the United States would not (before the Civil War) be a state in any recognizable European sense.

Greene's allegedly expansive endeavor, to situate the colonies and the early Republic in more inclusive contexts of experience and its theorization, inadvertently but ineluctably brings scholars back to American exceptionalism. Precisely by the criteria of postcolonial and state-formation theory, Americans mounted a colonial rebellion like no other and constructed a state like no other. Greene's good intentions come to an ironic end. His effort to transcend American parochialism and narcissism ends by heightening them.

Never mind. Nothing that Greene truly has to say in his essay depends on its *soi-disant* scaffolding. And once he gets past postcolonialism, state formation, and theory, Greene has some truly tantalizing things to say. Even the least tantalizing of them are true enough. Greene gets it right when he insists that the character of expansion in the new Republic was very much the character of expansion that "had been thoroughly worked out during the century and a half before the Revolution."[3] The motives that drove colonists to the frontiers in the years before independence drove citizens of the new nation westward in the years after. The untroubled assumptions of white racial superiority and of the naturalness of native dispossession ran across the centuries.

It does not matter that these essential constancies expose the irrelevance of postcolonial and state formation theories, which are predicated on rupture. It does not matter that Greene never specifies how the postcolonial perspective "opens up" questions that were, in any case, open long before in the work of Richard Slotkin, Francis Jennings, Richard Drinnon, and many others.[4]

It matters mightily that the states remained "the arenas in which most governance, most public life, and the domestic life of most Americans were principally centered."[5] It also matters mightily that the history of the early Republic neglects this palpable truth and obsesses instead on a national government that scarcely affected most Americans.

[3] Ibid., 246.

[4] Ibid. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973); Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1980).

[5] Greene, WMQ 64: 248.

Yet Greene does not quite know how to make it matter. He writes with a touching faith that truth revealed is truth that will prevail. He never grapples with other palpable truths: that winners write history and that history serves the present needs of the powerful. He begs that his "localist perspective" be "extended into the national era." He implores a "colonization" of United States history.[6] But he is spitting into the wind. The South lost the Civil War and the forces of nationalism have been in the saddle ever since.

At the end of his essay, Greene leaves to others with "vastly more knowledge" of later centuries the "extension of the colonial perspective into the national era."[7] But no amount of knowledge will effect the reversion he invites. Knowledge, in a sphere as sensitive as history, always serves the people who pay the pipers. Until those people no longer need an account of American origins that legitimates their national endeavors, Americans will continue to have the history they have had.

Of course that history leaves historians with a gaping discontinuity between colonial and national narratives: the one invincibly decentered, the other incorrigibly committed to the primacy of the center.[8] Greene would heal that breach and end that incoherence. He would reconnect early America and what used to be called the Middle Period. But he would do it on colonial terms for no better reason than that, on the whole, the evidence supports such a reintegration. History has never been made that way.

[6] Ibid., 246, 249.

[7] Ibid., 249–50.

[8] Michael Zuckerman, "Regionalism," in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers (Malden, Mass., 2003), 311–33.